

Local

The Potomac River, in good health and bad

By Megan Buerger May 2, 2012

If the Potomac River has gotten more attention than the Anacostia in the past 50 years, it's partly because the Potomac supplies 90 percent of the region's drinking water. That amounts to an average of 486 million gallons a day, according to the Potomac Conservancy. The Potomac watershed, which includes 14,670 miles of land that drains to the river, covers parts of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, the District, Maryland and Virginia. In the 1950s, reports of stench and dangerous levels of pollution clouded the Potomac's reputation. But the 383-mile river wasn't always in such bad shape.

History

In 1608, Capt. John Smith described the Potomac and Anacostia rivers as being full of wildlife. More than 300 years later, a 1914 Public Health Service study found the Potomac in "generally good condition" with "ample oxygen."

But things soon went downhill. The Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin reported that the District's raw and partially treated sewage doubled between 1932 and 1956. And in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared the river a "national disgrace."

"Johnson's words sparked a renewed interest in the Potomac," said Ed Merrifield, of the Potomac Riverkeeper group. "The river had really become an embarrassment."

The Clean Water Act was a turning point for the river, prompting federal laws on sewage effluents and major updates to the Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Facility in Southwest Washington. Fisheries reopened, largemouth bass reappeared, and litter levels in the Potomac fell drastically.

But years of stagnating pollution continue to haunt the river in less obvious ways. A 2005 U.S. Geological Survey found, to the public's horror, intersex fish that developed as a result of severely contaminated waters. The most recent report by the Potomac Conservancy downgraded the river from a D+ (2007) to a D (2011), citing poor land use in a rapidly growing region and a host of emerging contaminants.

“Today, the river is in danger of slipping backwards,” said Curtis Dalpa, the commission’s communications manager, “and not because of a lack of effort but because of rapid population growth.”

Biggest issues

Storm-water runoff and combined sewer overflows: Storm-water runoff occurs during periods of rainfall or snowmelt. The water, which can’t soak into hard surfaces such as paved driveways, sidewalks and streets, flows into nearby storm drains, picking up road oils, garbage and chemicals.

Cities use combined sewer systems to collect runoff and wastewater and keep it from flowing into nearby waterways. The region’s sewage is transported to a plant for treatment and then discharged into the Potomac. But the District’s sewer systems can only hold so much. When it rains, the pipes overflow and release excess wastewater into the river. Robin Broder, vice president of Potomac Riverkeeper, said combined sewage overflows are most common in older East Coast cities, where the population has outgrown antiquated sewer systems.

Invisible pollutants: Many problems the Potomac faces aren’t visible. “Today, our problems are hidden in the form of new contaminants that didn’t exist 20 years ago,” Merrifield said, “and we don’t have the technology to completely remove them yet.” Those contaminants are largely from pharmaceuticals and personal-care products, such as antidepressants, birth control pills and some shampoos and lotions with endocrine-disrupting compounds that, when improperly discarded or flushed down the toilet, contaminate the river.

Cleanup efforts

Green Streets: Montgomery County officials are tackling storm water by planting grassy areas along roads where rainwater can dissipate and soak in before running off highways and parking lots. Those projects, called Green Streets, are an example of low-impact development efforts in the Potomac watershed. Officials plan to retrofit 30 percent of the hard-surface areas this way.

Wastewater treatment upgrades: Over the past 40 years, the Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant, the largest in the world, has undergone significant expansion and updating. It can treat 370 million gallons of sewage a day. Over the next 15 years, D.C. Water, which operates Blue Plains, has planned about [\\$4 billion](#) in improvements, including modernizing the city's sewers and building three Metro-size tunnels to store runoff when it rains. Julie Lawson of the Anacostia Watershed Society said that when completed, the tunnels will reduce combined sewage overflows by 98 percent.

What you can do

Read labels. Buy personal hygiene products made with natural ingredients. "If you can't pronounce the chemicals on the ingredients label, you probably don't want to buy it, and you definitely don't want to flush it down the toilet," Broder said. For information on medication disposal, visit www.disposemy meds.org. To find products that are environmentally friendly, go to www.ewg.org/skindeep.

Control lawn care: Avoid using fertilizer and pesticides near ditches and gutters, where they can flow into storm drains. If possible, treat your lawn during dry weather, because heavy rainfall creates runoff. It is illegal to dispose of lawn and garden chemicals in storm drains. "The Potomac won't be safe until we change our behavior" Merrifield said, "and that's the toughest part. How do you explain to a person that by over-fertilizing their lawn in Olney, they're contributing to the dead zones in the Potomac and the Bay?"

Get informed. The Alice Ferguson Foundation, which started the first Potomac Watershed Cleanup 24 years ago and is headquartered at Hard Bargain Farm in Accokeek, Md., is hosting its annual Spring Farm Festival on Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. The event includes a history of the Potomac River, a plants and crafts sale, hay wagon rides, barn tours and live music.

Weird things found in the Potomac

- DirecTV satellite dish that had been used as a barbecue grill
- Giant plastic crocodile head and headless dog lawn sculpture
- Medical waste such as an IV drip bag, a pack of hypodermic needles and a vial of blood
- Decaying cow heads, a bag of rotting chicken parts and a chopped-up deer in a bag

In 42-year-old cold case, suspected murder victim turns up alive

"She had no clue we thought she was dead," trooper Nathan Trate said.

Here's why some people drop dead while shoveling snow

The cold weather and the hard work of shoveling snow create what one cardiologist calls a "perfect storm" for heart attacks.

Carolyn Hax: When an ultimatum is justified

It has to be for matters of safety or health, and it has to benefit the recipient first.
